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AUTHOR	Smallwood, Betty Ansin
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ABSTRACT

Children's literature, widely used with elementary English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students, can be adapted to teach literacy skills to adult ESL learners as well. Children's books often have captivating story lines and beautiful illustrations, and many have universal appeal and address mature themes and topics. Its successful use in adult ESL programs is enhanced by age-sensitive book selections, clear class presentations, and the creative development of related lesson and unit plans. From its strong foundation as a way to develop literacy in elementary schools, children's literature has recently become incorporated into family literacy programs, in which parents learn to read in order to transmit literacy patterns to their children. This trend is now spreading to the newly developing ESL family literacy programs and general adult ESL programs. The benefits of children's literature, book selection, classroom presentation, and extension activities are discussed. (VWL)

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Children's Literature for Adult ESL Literacy

by Betty Ansin Smallwood, George Mason University

Children's literature, widely used with elementary English as a second language (ESL) students (Heald-Taylor, 1989; Smallwood, 1991), can be adapted to teach literacy skills to adult ESL learners as well. Children's books often have captivating story lines and beautiful illustrations, and many have universal appeal and address mature themes and topics as well. Children's literature, then, is not just for kids! Its successful use in adult ESL programs is enhanced by age-sensitive book selections, clear class presentations, and the creative development of related lesson and unit plans.

From its strong foundation as a way to develop literacy in elementary schools (Johnson & Louis, 1987), children's literature has recently become incorporated into family literacy programs, in which parents learn to read in order to transmit literacy patterns to their children (Handel & Goldsmith, 1990; Sharp, 1991). This trend is now spreading to the newly developing ESL family literacy programs (Terdy & Berkowitz, 1989) and general adult ESL programs (Flickinger, 1984).

Benefits of Children's Literature

Adult learners can benefit in many ways from reading children's literature. The stories are contextually whole and inherently meaningful. They provide an authentic source of comprehensible English language input and can lower inhibitions, or the "affective filter" (Krashen, 1982). Reading aloud to learners is effective during the silent period of second language (L2) acquisition (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982), because they can just listen and focus on understanding, without needing to produce language. After a book has been enjoyed and understood, numerous speaking, reading, and writing opportunities can emerge. The teacher can adjust reading materials to learners' interests, needs, and levels of L2 proficiency by carefully selecting appropriate books and by modifying the language during oral readings. Picture books offer the advantage of illustrations to explain much of the vocabulary. Repeated patterns provide an additional aid for language learning.

Book Selection

Thousands of children's books line library shelves and fill whole bookstores. However, not all are equally successful with L2 learners in a classroom setting, and those appropriate for ESL adults form an even smaller subset. Therefore, book selection is critical, and gaining knowledge of the selection process is more important than obtaining a list of books. Most of the criteria below relate to picture books, usually 28-32 pages long. These are useful for ESL classes because they provide illustrations paired with enough fairly simple text for classroom reading exposure, yet their length allows ample time for rereadings and extension activities.

Ask the following questions about each book as you peruse the bookshelves.

1. Does it relate to your curriculum objectives? These can include broad social, cultural, or political topics, specific life skill competencies, vocabulary groupings, or grammatical structures. For example, *How Many Days to America?* can generate discussion about the acceptance of undocumented boat people in the United States; *I Read Symbols* coordinates well with units on traffic and transportation; *The Gingerbread Man* reinforces the past tense.

2. Does it include adults? Does it have some adult protagonists, address mature themes, or carry universal messages? One needs to look carefully and critically for these qualities, but many fine choices exist. For example, *El Chino* tells of a young Chinese man pursuing his dream to become a bullfighter. *It Could Always Be Worse*, a story with adult characters, delightfully entertains while delivering a strong life message about making do with what one has.

3. Are there clear illustrations that help tell the story? The pictures are critical. Ideally, they should be large, detailed, and dramatic. Those by Susan Jeffers in *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky*, based on an historic speech by a Native American chief, offer a breathtaking example. They explain the vocabulary and convey the deeper meaning of the story, that is, respect for our environment.

4. Does it contain repeated, predictable language patterns? Patterns can include rhyming as well as repetitions of words, refrains, or entire sentences. They provide a natural opportunity for pattern practice. Poetry and singable books offer good sources. For example, *When I First Came to this Land*, a folk song/picture book about an adult immigrant experience, uses cumulative repetitions, plus a repeated chorus.

5. Does it use language only slightly beyond the level of the learners? When it does, it provides "comprehensible input," an essential ingredient for L2 acquisition (Krashen, 1982). Both the amount of text on a page and the level of syntactic complexity should be considered. This judgment is quite subjective, and it depends on teachers knowing the learners and their proficiency levels. For example, the illustrations and informal dialogue with children in *The Wednesday Surprise* make it comprehensible to advanced beginners, while the more difficult grammatical structures in *Roses Sing on New Snow* move it toward the intermediate level, and the more poetic language in *The Star-Spangled Banner* makes it more appropriate with advanced learners.

6. Is there a cultural or multicultural perspective? Books based on the countries, cultures, and life experiences of the learners allow learners to bring a wealth of personal knowledge to the text and to develop multicultural sensitivity as they are exposed to the stories and struggles of various ethnic groups. In *I Speak*

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English for my Mom, a classic conflict is developed through Rosa, an Hispanic woman who depends on her child, Lupe, as her translator. Immigration and cross-cultural adjustment themes are increasingly featured in picture books and young adult novels. *How Many Days to America?* tells of a dramatic Caribbean boat escape, and *Children of the River*, a novel, tenderly depicts the conflicts in a budding cross-cultural love between two teenagers, a Cambodian girl and an American boy.

Classroom Presentation

The shared reading process can be divided into three stages—pre-reading, reading aloud, and discussion—that can easily fit into a one-hour session.

Pre-reading (5-10 minutes). The teacher shares general reasons for reading the book or specific listening objectives, such as identifying a particular theme or structure; learners predict the story from the cover picture; vocabulary is previewed, with realia, if possible; the class discusses topics related to those in the book or in similar books they have read. These motivational strategies engage learners in the book and help connect it to other experiences, literary or real-life.

Reading aloud (15-20 minutes). To engage a class of learners in an oral reading of a book, it is important to read with expression, slowly and dramatically; pause when appropriate; move around the room, taking time to show the pictures; modify the language in the book, if needed, to facilitate comprehension; stop occasionally to highlight a new word or concept or to check for comprehension.

Discussion and review (10-15 minutes). At the completion of the story, allow ample time for discussion. To encourage spontaneous reactions, you may only need to ask, "What did you think?"; or you may want to pose more specific questions to focus the discussion. An oral comprehension check can serve as a review of the story and as an informal assessment. If the story is short, like *Leo the Late Bloomer*, you can reread it, with students reading along chorally or chiming in on the repeated phrases.

Extension Activities

Books initially read aloud by the teacher can lead to creative, learner-centered literacy activities, from roundrobin story telling to rewriting book endings or composing independent stories. It is best to plan just one or two major activities per book, so as not to dampen learner enthusiasm. With *I Read Symbols*, a basic literacy class can practice word-symbol associations in student-made concentration games. A slightly more advanced class can work on story sequencing and play past-tense Bingo after reading *The Gingerbread Man*. A still more advanced class that has read *I Speak English for my Mom* might rewrite the story from the mother's perspective and then role play the various conflicts in the story.

During the extension activities, it is helpful to reread the book itself frequently. This gives learners opportunities to read along with you and eventually retell and read the story on their own, with the help of the pictures. The book can also be made available for independent student reading. For this, additional library copies are an asset.

Conclusion

Children's literature can be one of the most effective teaching materials available for students of all ages (Smallwood, 1991). Using it to develop literacy is a well documented approach for elementary students, both native and nonnative speakers. It is newer, but increasingly popular, with adult ESL learners, especially in ESL family literacy programs. Sharing literature creates a powerful bond between people. Plus, it is fun, inexpensive, and fairly easy to do. For further development of this approach, see *The Literature Connection: A Read-Aloud Guide for Multicultural Classrooms* (Smallwood, 1991) and *Beyond Words: Picture Books for Older Readers and Writers* (Benedict & Carlisle, 1992).

Recommended Children's Literature for Adult ESL

Beginners

Brand, O. (1974). *When I First Came to This Land.* New York: Putnam.

Bunting, E. (1989). *The Wednesday Surprise.* New York: Clarion.

Hoban, T. (1983). *I Read Symbols.* New York: Greenwillow.

Kraus, R. (1970). *Leo the Late Bloomer.* New York: Harper & Row.

Parkes, B., & Smith, J. (1984). *The Gingerbread Man.* Crystal Lake, IL: Rigby.

Intermediate

Bunting, E. (1988). *How Many Days to America?* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Jeffers, S. (1991). *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky.* New York: Dial.

Say, A. (1990). *El Chino.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Stanek, M. (1989). *I Speak English for my Mom.* Niles, IL: Albert Whitman.

Yee, P. (1991). *Roses Sing on New Snow.* New York: MacMillan.

Zemach, M. (1976). *It Could Always be Worse.* New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Advanced

Crew, L. (1989). *Children of the River.* New York: Dell.

Fritz, J. (1987). *Shh! We're Writing the Constitution.* New York: Putnam.

Spier, P. (1986). *The Star-spangled Banner.* New York: Doubleday.

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Benedict, S., & Carlisle, L. (1992). *Beyond words: Picture books for older readers and writers.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Dulay, H., Burt, M., & Krashen, S. (1982). *Language two.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Flickinger, G.G. (1984). Language, literacy, children's literature: The link to communicative competency for ESOL adults. Paper presented at the International Reading Association (IRA), Texas State Council. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 268 504)

Handel, R., & Goldsmith, E. (1990). *Family reading: An intergenerational approach to literacy.* (Teacher's Guide and Photocopy Masters.) Syracuse, NY: New Readers Press.

Heald-Taylor, G. (1989). *Whole language strategies for ESL students.* San Diego: Dormac.

Johnson, T.D., & Louis, D.R. (1987). *Literacy through literature.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and practices of second language acquisition.* New York: Pergamon.

Sharp, P.A. (1991). Picture books in the adult literacy curriculum. *Journal of Reading, 35*(3), 216-219.

Smallwood, B.A. (1991). *The literature connection: A read-aloud guide for multicultural classrooms.* Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.

Terdy, D., & Berkowitz, L. (1989). *Home English literacy for parents: An ESL family literacy curriculum.* Des Plaines, IL: Northwest Educational Cooperative. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 313 926)

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